

5-1-1941

## Personal Memoirs

Jack T. Johnson

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### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Jack T. "Personal Memoirs." *The Palimpsest* 22 (1941), 155-160.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol22/iss5/4>

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## Personal Memoirs

In 1908 the State Historical Society of Iowa published the *Autobiography of John Chambers*, supplemented with his "Family Record", a genealogical summary of the Chambers family. The personal reminiscence had been prepared by Iowa's second Territorial Governor and had for more than half a century remained in the possession of the family of his son, Henry Chambers of Louisville, Kentucky. After correspondence and a visit to Louisville, Professor Benjamin F. Shambaugh obtained permission to publish the document. John C. Parish, who was then writing a biography of Governor Chambers, edited the manuscript of the autobiography.

The original manuscript consisted of thirty-three pages eight by ten inches in dimensions, written closely in the characteristically legible handwriting of John Chambers. He, himself, lamented the unsatisfactory composition of the document. "It has been one of the troubles of my whole life", he confessed in a letter of January 26, 1852, "that I never could attain a style in writing, with which I was satisfied and I never wrote anything and laid it aside for a short time,



[in] which I did not find much to correct in the style & language when I came back to examine it again."

Mr. Chambers undertook the writing of his autobiography at the request of his youngest son. Henry Chambers asked his father on November 27, 1851, to outline his family history because he often "had occasion to regret" his ignorance of his "family and near connections". In reply, Governor Chambers on December 2, 1851, wrote: "And as that which is to be done ought always to be done promptly, especially with persons of my advanced age and unstable health, I proceed to comply with your request, promising that there is very little in our family history to distinguish it from the history of thousands of other families in this country."

Three days later on December 5th, Governor Chambers wrote his son that he had begun the autobiography. "For some days past I have spent an hour or two in preparing the sketch of family History which you request in your last letter, but as I soon tire of writing it progresses slowly — I am pleased however that you made the request as neither of your brothers seem to have ever felt or expressed any interest in the subject. It will at last be a mere outline without interest to any person out of the family, when I get through



I will send it to you." He then added a postscript: "I am reduced to writing with a steel pen and would as soon dig potatoes with a negroe mall." The trying task was completed by the following January 12th.

The autobiography was written at a small tavern in Washington, Kentucky, where Chambers had gone to stay through the winter of 1851-1852. In February, he moved to the home of his daughter. By summer he had contracted the fatal illness of which he died on September 21, 1852.

With remarkable memory for a man over seventy years of age the ex-Governor of Iowa traced his reminiscences. His ancestors, of the Cameron clan, had refused to participate in the Scotch rebellion of 1645 and took refuge in Ireland. There they assumed the name of Chambers. Rapidly the Governor sketched the course of events — the coming of his grandfather to America, business enterprises of various relatives, participation in the War for Independence, and finally the migration of his parents from New Jersey to Kentucky when he was fourteen years old.

Governor Chambers emphasized a fact that disturbed him all his life — his neglected education. His experience as a clerk and his preparation for the law were presented as interesting episodes. With pathetic fidelity he described his courtship,



marriage, and sudden death of his first wife, Margaret Taylor. He then, with naive simplicity, recorded the circumstances surrounding his marriage to Hannah Taylor, his first wife's half-sister.

What must have remained most vivid in his memory, however, was his participation in the War of 1812 and his association with General William H. Harrison, because these events were retold in considerable detail. Having told his brief military experience, Chambers described his entrance into politics, his service in the State legislature and in Congress, his general unwillingness to accept public office, and the culmination of his partisan enthusiasm in the campaign for General Harrison in 1840. The concluding pages of the *Autobiography* were devoted to his account of accepting the position of Governor of the Territory of Iowa and to the compilation of genealogical items.

"Old men", concluded Chambers, "who have spent much of their time in public life or the pursuit of popularity and office, are generally considered when they retire from such pursuits from the necessity indicated by age and some times by disease, as disposed to condemn their own pursuits & censure those who are pursuing the course they have abandoned. Such is not exactly my course. I would not however with my experience



pursue the same course if I had my life to live over. It leads to the neglect of some of the duties which a man owes to his family, of much more importance to him & them and perhaps to the Country than any services which he can render to the Republic, without indeed he happens to be one of those rare individuals of whom an age produces only a few".

All his life John Chambers had tried to avoid public office, yet he was not one to shirk his duties as a citizen. He had observed that the rewards were seldom commensurate with the sacrifice. "I am unable at present", he wrote at the end of his career, "to call to recollection an instance in which a clever man of ordinary or even a little more than ordinary capacity, beloved by his acquaintances, and to use the appropriate term popular, has either benefitted himself or his family in a life devoted to *the public service*, and it almost makes me shudder to look back upon the numerous instances that have come under my observation, in which such men and others much more distinguished, have left, or have yet to leave ruined families — ruined in fortune, ruined in their morals, degraded in their habits and course of life — the only reward of life devoted to the public service by their fathers."

Years of experience in public and private rela-



tions, on the frontier and in the national capital, as a soldier and a lawyer, had convinced the old Kentucky gentleman that two evils were particularly prevalent. "One is the effect of imputed talents in particular individuals of numerous families, from which every ass of a whole generation claims distinction. The other is the arrogance of poor stupid wretches who found their claims for notice, if not for distinction, upon the wealth of some ancestor or relation, or perhaps worse, upon the accidental possession of it in their own persons."

This autobiography, which illuminates the life of John Chambers, ended with a set of moral precepts for his son. "I have yet to see wealth pass by descent beyond the third generation," he warned, "but I have seen & see every day the second generation who have squandered the labours of their predecessors or are squandering it, in miserable low degrading dissipation, or more disgraceful gamblings with the most degraded of the black-leg tribe, with whom they would not lock arms in the street & yet shut themselves up with them night after night & day after day, permitting their pockets to be picked by them. I pray God to guard my descendants against evil habits, but especially against drunkenness & gambling."

JACK T. JOHNSON